

Report to Town Meeting by the Moderator's Committee on the
Posting of Police Reports
June 2017

Introduction

At the November 2016 Town Meeting, Warrant Article 30 proposed that the Brookline Police Department post police reports online:

This article shall require the Brookline Police Department to post every police report online on the town website within forty-eight hours of the incident. The Brookline Police Department shall create a link on the town website which shall list all police incident reports by the date of their occurrences. Each report shall have a title which accurately reflects said occurrence. Full and accurate reports shall be filed online no later than forty-eight hours after the event. If the incident is under investigation a descriptive title of the event shall be posted. At the conclusion of the investigation the full police report shall be filed online with the date the investigation was completed and posted online.

After the Board of Selectmen voted 5-0 and the Advisory Committee voted 18-0-1 to recommend that Article 30 be referred to committee, Town Meeting voted accordingly. This moderator's committee was formed to study the "desirability and feasibility" of posting police incident reports online. Moderator Sandy Gadsby appointed Lynda Roseman, Leonard Weiss, Selectman Bernard Greene, Tom Elwertowski, Brian Bergstein, Police Deputy Superintendent Myles Murphy, and Officer John Canney to the committee. Murphy and Bergstein were co-chairs.

The committee's meetings (<http://www.brooklinema.gov/AgendaCenter/Moderators-Committee-on-the-Posting-of-P-107-107>) included one public hearing. Members also interviewed four employees of the police department and the author of the warrant article and researched the data-publication practices of several other cities and towns.

The author of the warrant article said his goal was to ensure that the citizens of Brookline are as aware as possible of what is happening in their neighborhoods. In particular, he said, he was motivated by the fact that many people did not know about a dog attack in his neighborhood.

The committee also took it as a given that proper dissemination of information is a crucial responsibility of the police department because transparency strengthens the town's trust in and understanding of the work that officers do. Any reasonable steps to make police operations in Brookline more transparent should be welcomed.

Nonetheless, **the committee concluded that posting police reports as specified in the warrant article would not be desirable because it would not enhance public awareness.** It would substantially increase the likelihood of an illegal disclosure of private information in police records. It also would go far beyond what other cities and towns do (see appendix for details). Instead the committee recommends that the police department take other, simpler steps to improve public disclosure while protecting citizens' privacy.

Public Disclosure Today

The Brookline Police Department maintains a log of almost all officer activity. This log tracks all calls into dispatch, including requests from the public and activities initiated by officers. There were more than 90,000 such calls for service in 2014 and 2015 and 69,000 of them in 2016. These log items are short notes only, tersely describing an officer's actions. The log is publicly available in police headquarters, viewable on a laptop at the front desk.

The majority of the incidents in the log do not lead to detailed police reports with extensive narrative information. Those are generated only for the most serious incidents. Brookline police average about 6,500 of these reports per year. But their contents are not entirely public information. Before being released to crime victims, journalists, and other interested parties upon written request, a member of the police department staff must redact a report to make sure that it complies with local, state, and federal laws protecting private information such as Social Security numbers and medical conditions, and that it does not reveal certain details pertaining to juveniles or to active investigations. For example, a police report that is released to a member of the public may reveal that someone was taken to the hospital after being hit in the head. It likely would be a legal violation, however, to reveal that the person had a fractured skull. (Such medical-transport reports tend to make up half or more of all police reports generated in Brookline.)

To inform the public of certain crimes and other incidents of note, the police department disseminates information on Twitter and Facebook and on a blog on the police department website, with brief descriptions of incidents selected by the police department's Community Services Division (see <http://blog.brooklinepolice.com/> and appendix for examples). The police chief discloses town-wide crime statistics in semi-annual reports to Town Meeting and the Town Administrator (<http://www.brooklinepolice.com/147/Annual-Reports>), and the department tallies such figures even more regularly through an aggregation engine called Compstat. The department also feeds data on significant incidents to a third-party service known as CrimeReports.com, which maintains a database of the events and plots them on a map. (See appendix for details and comparison to other towns.)

The committee believes the police department is meeting its obligation to notify the public about crime trends and other safety issues.

Even the author of the warrant article acknowledged to the committee that the posting of incident reports was probably unnecessary for meeting his goal of ensuring public access to relevant information about their neighborhoods. He told the committee that his article was written in haste, right before a warrant article deadline, to address the concerns of neighbors who felt a dog attack had not been publicized well enough. Upon meeting with the committee, he said he was learning for the first time about some of the police department's existing practices for reporting information about crime trends and individual crimes and other notable incidents, both online and in the publicly available logs at police headquarters.

Recommendations

The committee unanimously agreed that the police department should not post all incident reports on its website. Taking such a step would be burdensome and impractical. Of the 6,500 reports per year that the department generates, written requests from the public come in for about 1,500 of them. Records access officer Amanda Williams told committee members Tom Elwertowski and Brian Bergstein that she spends a minimum of 5-10 minutes vetting and redacting any police report before it can be released. Performing the redaction work on an additional 5,000 reports a year would require at least 50 to 100 days of labor—and would potentially increase the town's legal liability for improper disclosures. The committee found no other municipality that follows this practice. (See appendix for a description and comparison of the online availability of police information provided by Brookline and nearby communities.)

The committee does believe, however, that the department should take several steps to improve its information disclosure practices.

- The department should strive to make its reports in public channels, especially the blog, as descriptive as possible.
- The department should make much more explicit on its website what the blog is: a snapshot of incidents selected by the Community Services Division of the police department, and not a comprehensive list of crime reports. This explanation should clearly state the criteria for selection.
- The department's website should clearly state that the selection of cases in the blog may differ from what appears in the police blotter section of the *Brookline TAB*.
- The department should make it much clearer that Brookline feeds data to CrimeReports.com. That notice should also clarify that Brookline may have trends that do not clearly show up in CrimeReports.com's limited categories of information. (Table 2 in the appendix shows that CrimeReports does not, for example, break down animal incidents by type.)

The department took up some of these recommendations even before this report was completed. For example, the blog now includes a clearer disclosure about what items are included and not included.

The committee also discussed whether the department could post its daily log online, given that this file is today available for anyone to view at police department headquarters. Because it describes overviews of incidents and their locations but is generally not supposed to give names or other details that require redaction, it would be feasible for the department to make this log available on the website as well. But the committee does not feel that step would be desirable. Several committee members questioned the public-interest value of opening the entire log file to anyone on the Internet. Deputy Superintendent Murphy raised concerns that making even the terse log information more readily available could subject the town to more privacy complaints and increase its legal liability for accidental disclosure of private information. Notably, other towns that put log-like files online (see appendix for examples) do not post their entire logs unredacted.

Appendix

To determine how Brookline's online availability of police information compares with other municipalities', 13 other jurisdictions were reviewed in March 2017: Arlington, Belmont, Boston, Cambridge, Concord, Dedham, Needham, Newton, Somerville, Waltham, Watertown, Wellesley and Weston.

Five provide brief summaries of most incidents (Concord, Dedham, Newton, Waltham, Watertown). Five provide information for significant incidents (Arlington, Belmont, Boston, Brookline, Cambridge). One offers an email signup for neighborhood alerts (Wellesley). And three offer only a contact page for requesting records (Needham, Somerville, Weston).

Table 1, which follows, compares reporting by city or town on the randomly selected date of March 10, 2017. Definitions of each term follow the table.

Municipality	Format	Number of Items for 3/10/17	Time	Address	Desc	Responder	Export	Frequency
Brookline	web page	3	day	street	yes			2-3 days
Brookline	CrimeReports	4	day*	rounded			yes	daily
Arlington	CrimeReports	0	day	rounded			yes	daily
Belmont	CrimeReports	2	minute	rounded			yes	daily
Boston	PDF	265	minute	full		yes		weekdays
Boston	Socrata	265	minute	street			yes	daily
Cambridge	web page	14	minute	street	yes			daily
Concord	PDF	51	minute	masked	yes			weekly
Dedham	PDF	48	minute	street	yes	yes		weekly
Newton	text file	81	minute	full		yes		daily
Waltham	PDF	95	minute	full			yes**	daily
Watertown	PDF	62	minute	masked				weekly

* occasionally by minute, ** feature did not work.

Format: Some municipalities deliver events as a PDF document. One provides a text file. Some list events on a web page (blog). Some upload events to another website which provide various viewing and downloading capabilities.

Comprehensiveness: Some municipalities list all or most events (often 50+ per day) while others list only significant events (usually < 10 per day).

Time: Some municipalities provide a time to the minute for incidents. Other report only the day and occasionally the hour.

Address: Some municipalities provide a full address; some round the address number down to a multiple of 100, some mask the address number with a code so that different locations can be distinguished but not identified. Some provide only a street name. If geocoded data (latitude, longitude) is provided, it is not more accurate than the available address.

Description: Some municipalities provide a description comprising a sentence or more. Most provide just a category and subcategory.

Responder: Some municipalities include the name of responding officers.

Export: Some municipalities provide the capability to download incident data in a format suitable for spreadsheets and other analytical tools. Most use Socrata (<https://socrata.com>), a service for filtering, viewing, and downloading government data. Larger municipalities customize and use Socrata directly while smaller municipalities use CrimeReports (<https://www.crimereports.com>), a standardized presentation of police data built on top of Socrata.

Frequency: Some municipalities publish incidents daily and others weekly.

Examples by Municipality

Brookline

Brookline describes significant incidents in a blog (<http://blog.brooklinepolice.com>) every one to three days.

3/10/17 – Found Property

An officer responded to Gibbs St. for a report of found property. The reporting party stated he picked up a wallet on Atherton Rd. on the evening of 3/6/17 or 3/7/17. An attempt to contact the owner was made but, was unsuccessful.

3/10/2017 – Arrest

Officers responded to Risley Rd to apprehend a subject for a probation violation. The subject was placed under arrest without incident.

Brookline Police Blog excerpt

Data is also uploaded to the data to the CrimeReports website

(<https://www.crimereports.com/agency/brookline-police-department-ma>) where it can be viewed or downloaded.

incident_id	797,056,229	address_2		updated_at	03/17/2017 03:30:23 AM
case_number	2017-0001133	city	BROOKLINE	location	POINT (-71.1225826 42.3478166)
incident_datetime	03/10/2017 12:00:00 AM	state	MA	hour_of_day	0
incident_type_primary	Property Crime	zip	02446	day_of_week	Friday
incident_description	FOUND PROPERTY	country		parent_incident_type	Property Crime
clearance_type		latitude	42.3478166		
address_1	1 Block GIBBS ST	longitude	-71.1225826		
		created_at	03/11/2017 04:30:20 AM		

incident_id	797,056,230	address_2		updated_at	03/17/2017 03:30:23 AM
case_number	2017-0001141	city	BROOKLINE	location	POINT (-71.142365 42.3027086)
incident_datetime	03/10/2017 12:00:00 AM	state	MA	hour_of_day	0
incident_type_primary	Community Policing	zip	02467	day_of_week	Friday
incident_description	WARRANT:PROBATION VIOLATION	country		parent_incident_type	Proactive Policing
clearance_type		latitude	42.3027086		
address_1	1 Block RISLEY RD	longitude	-71.142365		
		created_at	03/11/2017 04:30:20 AM		

Brookline Police data from CrimeReports (same incidents as blog)

Arlington

Arlington uploads data to CrimeReports (<http://www.arlingtonma.gov/departments/police/crime-reports>).

Belmont

Belmont uploads data to CrimeReports

(http://www.belmontpd.org/Pages/BelmontPD_Webdocs/crimereports).

Boston

Boston provides a Public Journal of incidents as a PDF. It is one of several daily news items (<http://bpdnews.com>).

Report Date & Time	Complaint #	Date & Time of Occurrence	Location of Occurrence
3/10/2017 12:32:00 PM	172019020	3/10/2017 11:46:00 AM	D14 - 12 WADSWORTH ST
Nature of Incident			
BURGLARY - RESIDENTIAL - ATTEMPT			
Officer			
116111 JESSICA COPPNEY			
Arrests			
MUHAMMAD, IBRAHIMA 12 PRATT ST BSTN, MA B & E - Attempted, B&E Residence, Day			

Report Date & Time	Complaint #	Date & Time of Occurrence	Location of Occurrence
3/10/2017 11:52:00 AM	172019023	3/10/2017 11:52:00 AM	B2 - 102 INTERVALE ST
Nature of Incident			
LARCENY ALL OTHERS			
Officer			
103765 JOHN MACLAUGHLAN			

Boston Police Public Journal excerpt

Boston also uploads incidents to the Boston Open Data site (<https://data.cityofboston.gov/Public-Safety/Crime-Incident-Reports-August-2015-To-Date-Source-/fqn4-4qap/data>) where it can be viewed or downloaded.

INCIDENT NUMBER	1172019020	REPORTING AREA	799	Location	(42.3551479°, -71.12674488°)
OFFENSE CODE	00521	SHOOTING		MONTH	3
OFFENSE CODE GROUP	Residential Burglary	OCCURRED ON DATE	03/10/2017 11:46:00 AM	DAY OF WEEK	Friday
OFFENSE DESCRIPTION	BURGLARY - RESIDENTIAL - ATTEMPT	Hour	11	UCR PART	Part One
DISTRICT	D14	YEAR	2017	STREET	WADSWORTH ST
				LAT	42.3551479
				LONG	-71.12674488

INCIDENT NUMBER	1172019023	REPORTING AREA	328	Location	(42.31049939°, -71.07733579°)
OFFENSE CODE	00619	SHOOTING		MONTH	3
OFFENSE CODE GROUP	Larceny	OCCURRED ON DATE	03/10/2017 11:52:00 AM	DAY OF WEEK	Friday
OFFENSE DESCRIPTION	LARCENY ALL OTHERS	Hour	11	UCR PART	Part One
DISTRICT	B2	YEAR	2017	STREET	INTERVALE ST
				LAT	42.31049939
				LONG	-71.07733579

Boston Police data from Socrata (same incidents as Journal)

Available details vary between the two presentations. The PDF includes a full address and responding officer; the downloadable data provides only a street name and omits the responder.

Cambridge

Cambridge provides a daily incident blog (<https://www.cambridgema.gov/cpd/newsandalerts>).

02/10/2017 12:51	BROADWAY
INCIDENT 17000883	A Lowell resident reported her driver's license and debit card as stolen.
LARCENY UNDER \$250 c266 S30	
02/10/2017 13:02	MELLEN ST
INCIDENT 17000885	Cambridge Police were dispatched to Mellen Street on a report of a past larceny from a building.
LARCENY FROM BUILDING c266 S20	

Cambridge Police Incident Blog excerpt

Concord

Concord provides a weekly Dispatch Log (<http://www.concordnet.org/1416/Dispatch-Call-Logs>) of incidents in PDF format.

For Date: 03/10/2017 - Friday

17-6172 0022 M V Stop
Location/Address: FAIRHAVEN RD + CONCORD TPKE

17-6174 0026 Suspicious Activity
Location/Address: [CON 6589] WALDEN ST
Received radio call from Ofc Mulcahy Car 6 reporting
checking on MA CO parked in the Hapggod Forest
parking lot. Ofc Mulcahy reports DMV with note advising M/V to be removed
in the morning.

Concord Police Dispatch Log excerpt

Dedham

Dedham provides a weekly incident log (http://www.dedhampolice.org/crimewatch_incidents.htm) in PDF format.

2017000004356	03/10/2017 17:18	BUSSEY ST	WALK AND TALK	SEE DISPATCHER REMAR
<u>Responding Officers</u> Patrol Officer Matthew E Blake				
<u>Incident Dispatcher Remarks:</u> WALK & TALK				
2017000004358	03/10/2017 19:15	PROV HIGHWAY	ATTEMPTED LARCENY	REPORT
<u>Responding Officers</u> Patrol Officer Collin G O'Sullivan				
<u>Incident Dispatcher Remarks:</u> BLACK MALE WITH RED PUFFY JACKET LEFT WITH LIGHT SKINNED FEMALE WEARING GLASSES APPROX 18:00 LEFT COUNTERFEIT CREDIT CARD LEFT UNKNOWN DIRECTION AND CONVEYANCE				

Dedham Police Incident Log excerpt

Needham

Needham provides an Incident Report Request page (<http://www.needhamma.gov/forms.aspx?FID=257>).

Newton

Newton provides a daily Police Log (http://www.newtonpolice.com/POLICE_LOG/CURRENT) of incidents in TXT format.

[Type text]

[Type text]

[Type text]

17009281	3/10/2017	1242	108 LOVETT RD	ALM/BURG	SETIABUDI G	496
17009283	3/10/2017	1245	ONE NEWTON PLACE / 275 WASHINGTON ST	MVA	PAGLIA RICH	491

Newton Police Log excerpt

Somerville

Somerville provides a contact page (<http://somervillepd.com/index.php/services/records-requests>) for its Records Bureau.

Waltham

Waltham provides a weekly Police Blotter (<http://www.city.waltham.ma.us/police-department/pages/police-blotter-arrest-log>) of incidents in PDF format.

Incident #: 17008851 Date: 2017-03-10 11:56:04 Type: LF/PROP

Location: 157 MYRTLE ST

Incident #: 17008849 Date: 2017-03-10 11:49:42 Type: ALM/BURG

Location: RENT-A-CENTER / 343 MOODY ST

Waltham Police Blotter excerpt

Watertown

Watertown provides a weekly Dispatch Log (<http://watertownpd.org/resources/arrest-dispatch-logs>) of incidents in PDF format.

17-4855	0959	Mental Health Issue	Arrest(s) Made
Location/Address:		[WAT 2809] CVS PHARMACY - MAIN ST	
Refer To Arrest:		17-4855-AR	
17-4856	1003	Directed Patrol	Services Rendered- Polic
Location/Address:		[WAT 3674] STOP + SHOP - PLEASANT ST	

Watertown Police Dispatch Log excerpt

Wellesley

Wellesley provides a signup page (<http://www.wellesleypolice.com/index.cfm/page/Community-Notifications-from-Wellesley-Police/pid/10763>) for various email categories. One alert category is serious crime.

Weston

Weston (<http://www.weston.org/215/Police-Department>) provides a link to the town public records request page.

Table 2: Animal incidents per year in Brookline, according to CrimeReports.com. The descriptions contain no references to specific animals.

Major Category	Description	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015 *	2016 †	2017 ‡	Total
Proactive Policing	ANIMAL BITE	31	22	21	23	20	41	25	33	12	228
Proactive Policing	ANIMAL DISTURBANCE	2	7	7	2	2	3	1	11	4	39
Proactive Policing	ANIMAL VIOLATION	1	1		2	1	5	2	1		13
Proactive Policing	INJURED/DEAD ANIMAL	3	6	1	7	3	7	1	1		29
Quality of Life	CRUELTY TO ANIMAL	1	1	1							3
All		38	37	30	34	26	56	29	46	16	312
* 6 months (Jan–Jun 2015), † 7.6 months (mid-May–Dec 2016), ‡ 5 months (Jan–May 2017)											